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ABSTRACT

Placing education majors in field-based experiences before student teaching has become a common practice in teacher preparation. Two introductory education courses offered at Northwest Missouri State University were designed to provide education majors with classroom experiences early in their program of study. The courses, Observation and Activity in the Elementary School (freshman year) and Observation and Activity in the Secondary School (sophomore year), are required for admission into the teacher education program. Four aspects of the courses are presented: (1) course history and evolution; (2) course components--observation and participation under the supervision of a classroom teacher, keeping a daily journal, and taking part in weekly discussions; (3) course benefits (provides an opportunity to examine teaching as a career choice and offers a preview of student teaching); and (4) future prospects for the courses. Information was obtained from interviews with course founders, instructors, and students, and from course syllabi. An observation and activity time line, observation suggestions from the course syllabus, a course evaluation, and diagrams of the interconnection of assignments and assignment goals are included. (LL)

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OBSERVATION AND ACTIVITY: AN ORIENTATION EXPERIENCE FOR EDUCATION MAJORS

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OBSERVATION AND ACTIVITY: AN ORIENTATION EXPERIENCE FOR EDUCATION MAJORS

Placing education majors in field-based experiences before student teaching has become a common practice in teacher preparation. This is due in part to mandates from educational accreditation agencies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 1990). Also, the inclusion of field-based experiences is seen as a necessary component to effective teacher training. The National Education Association (1982, p.15) has stated:

> The NEA calls for field-based experiences beginning with the first education course and continuing throughout the entire program. Experiences should be sequenced starting with observations, then working under direct supervision in teams and independently.

This paper will describe two introductory education courses at Northwest Missouri State University which were designed to provide education majors with classroom experiences early in their program of study. The two courses, Observation and Activity in the Elementary School and Observation and Activity in the Secondary School, are required for admission into the teacher education program and are considered by the College of Education faculty to be a major component of Northwest's teacher education program. Students normally take the elementary course during their freshman year. The secondary course is usually taken during the sophomore year.

Specifically, four aspects of the observation and activity courses will be presented. First, the history and evolution of the courses. Second, the content of the courses. Third, the benefits the courses have provided. Fourth, the future prospects for the courses at Northwest. The information presented in this paper was obtained from interviews conducted with two key

players in the founding of the observation courses, James Gates and Richard New; the experiences of the authors as instructors in these courses; information provided by students and instructors who have been involved in the courses; and course syllabi.

History and Evolution

The impetus for the elementary observation course began when Gates, who as a student teacher decided, "There has got to be an easier way, a transitional kind of thing so that when you get in front of boys and girls you feel somewhat comfortable." He described his teacher education courses as being typical, mainly lecture with no practical experience working with kids. He described it as going from those, ". . . types of situations to the student teaching of 41 sixth graders." He went on to describe the experience as traumatic. ". . . that was the scariest thing I ever confronted."

Later, when involved in higher education and supervising student teachers, he observed that little had changed since his student teaching experience, "I would see student teachers who had gone through the same kind of program that I had, lectures, no hands on, no practicums." He described his student teachers as lacking in discipline and organizational skills which lead to a lack of self confidence. "I said to myself, 'There needs to be a feeling of self confidence that student teachers have as they go into their [student teaching] experience.' So with that in mind I thought I need to have more pre-student teacher experiences. . ."

Upon his arrival at Northwest he devised an observation experience entitled "teacher assistance", which was completely voluntary and offered no college credit. Interested education majors were assigned to observe and aid in an elementary classroom three or four hours per week. Approximately 20 education majors enrolled in the initial program. Each semester the program enrollment grew. Gates described this growth as mainly by word of mouth. The program grew from a voluntary noncredit experience in 1970, to an elective course, to a

required course in 1975. In 1990 the course was required for formal admittance into the teacher education program.

The early development of the secondary observation and activity course was separate, yet similar to that of the elementary course. According to New, there were problems with students going all the way through the program, and discovering during their student teaching experience that they did not really want to teach. This realization came too late to make a career change. Also, it was noted that elementary majors involved in the observation and activity course seemed to relate to their students better and were more comfortable during student teaching than secondary majors. "We had people going out to student teach secondary that practically had seizures because they were scared to death of kids."

The observation course for secondary students was patterned after the practicum component of a middle school course which New had taught previously. It became a required course in 1980, and like the elementary course, it was made a prerequisite to being admitted into the teacher education program in 1990. The sequence of events relating to the evolution of the two observation courses is presented in Figure 1.

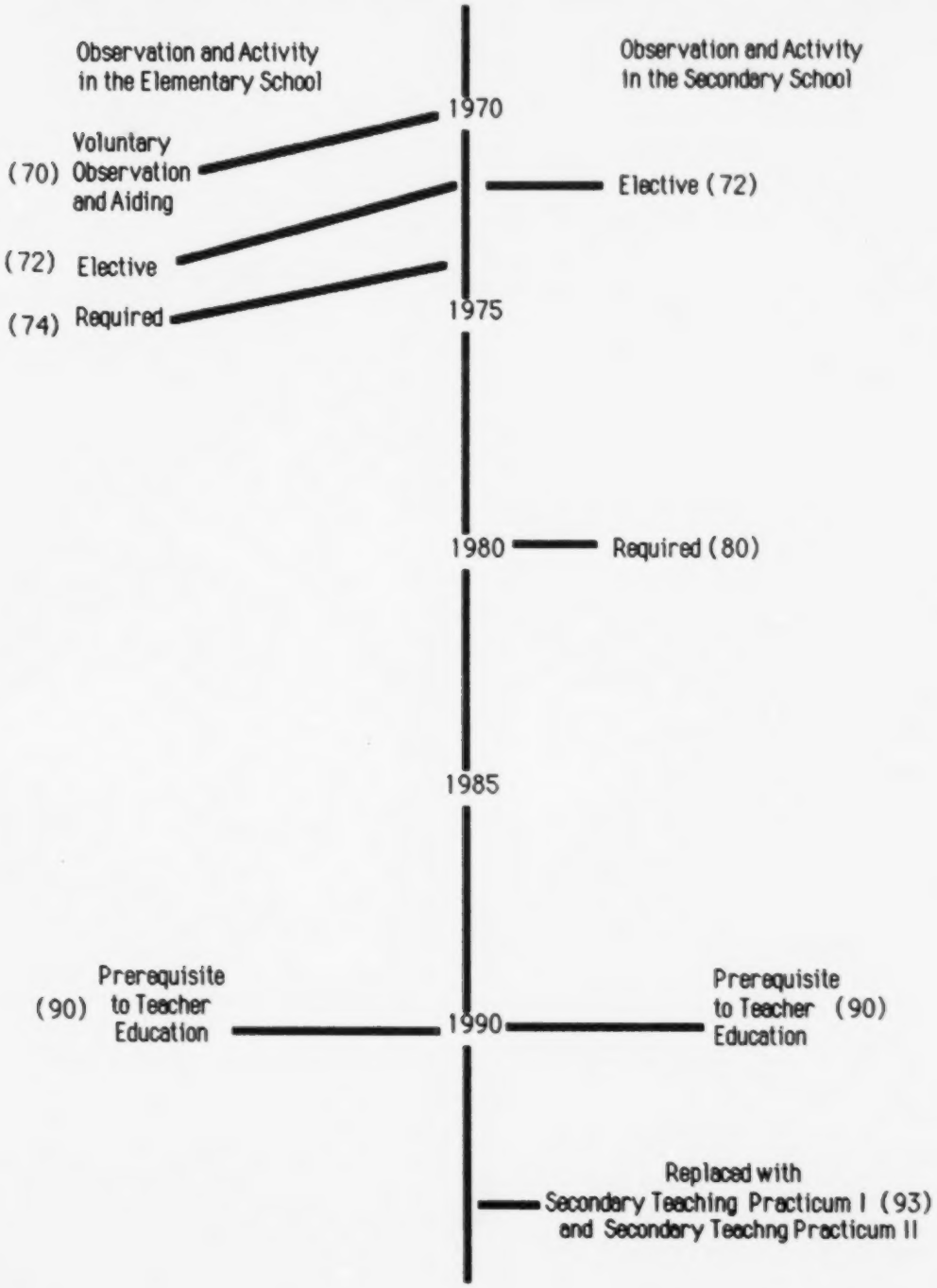
Course Description

The courses are offered in half semester blocks. Students meet one hour per week in seminar sessions conducted by a university instructor and observe in a classroom for approximately 35 hours over a period of 7 weeks. Students receive two hours credit for the courses.

The requirements for the individual sections of the observation courses vary among instructors. However, there are certain characteristics which are consistent in all the course sections, such as the use of discussion as the method of class presentations and the absence of

Figure 1

Observation and Activity Time Line



tests in course evaluation. Generally requirements for the courses are limited to three components. These are:

1. Observation and active participation under the supervision of a classroom teacher.
2. Keeping a daily journal of the observation experience.
3. Attendance and participation in a weekly discussion supervised by the course instructor.

The first component, observation and active participation (aiding) in a classroom is the main aspect of the course. Each week students were directed by the course instructor to observe specific aspects of teaching and student behavior. Figure 2 presents a section from the course syllabus which suggests topics for observation.

Besides spending time observing, students are also expected to work as an aide in the classroom and preform a variety of activities including:

1. Assistance with instructional activities. This may include making announcements, tutoring individuals and small groups, preparing bulletin boards, and grading objective tests.
2. Clerical tasks such as checking roll, typing, averaging grades, and collecting fees.
3. Maintenance of learning atmosphere in the classroom. This would include arranging furniture, storing books and supplies, and mounting displays.
4. Assistance with routine supervisory procedures. This would include aiding in the supervision of elementary children on the playground , in the lunchroom, between classrooms, and during dismissal.

Because of their inexperience, observation students are exempt from certain classroom activities. These include:

1. Assuming responsibility for supervising the whole class.
2. Teaching the whole class.
3. Preparing lesson plans.

Figure 2

Observation Suggestions From Course Syllabus

SOME THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN FUNCTIONING AS A TEACHER'S ASSISTANT

1. In what ways does the teacher make provisions for individual differences?

2. In what ways are each students' needs being met?

3. What kinds of disciplinary procedures did you see being utilized?

   a. Effective
   b. Ineffective
   c. Does the teacher use positive and/or negative reinforcement

4. What kinds of instructional materials did you see being utilized? (Materials in which the children were "caught up," interested, benefited, and involved.)

   a. Effective
   b. Ineffective

5. What kinds of teaching techniques and methods did you see utilized?

   a. Effective
   b. Ineffective
   c. Does the teacher use positive and/or negative reinforcement.

6. What kinds of grouping practices did you see that appeared to be operating?

   a. Effective
   b. Ineffective

4. Grading subjective tests.

The classroom teachers are responsible for a large portion of the students' course grade, normally 1/3 to 1/2. The teachers are provided an evaluation form (See Figure 3) which provides criteria for evaluation. This criteria is non-instructional and focuses on such aspects as the students' appearance, commitment, willingness, and enthusiasm.

The second component is a daily journal of their observations and experiences in the assigned classroom. Students are instructed to be very thorough in recording their observations as to the difficulties students experience, techniques teachers employ to solve them, and why they used those techniques. They are to also consider the effectiveness of those techniques. The journal is submitted to the course instructor on a regular basis for evaluation. Written comments advise students as to what areas they need to concentrate their observations and are asked thought provoking questions. This helps the students develop a "keener eye" during classroom observation as well as reflect on what they have observed.

The third component is the weekly seminar. The majority of the time spent in the seminar sessions is devoted to group discussions under the instructor's direction. Like the journal, this demands that the students recall and contemplate what they observed and experienced in the classroom. Students are not only encouraged to discuss what they observed, but also to speculate as to why certain techniques were used and the effectiveness of those techniques. This time of discussion allows the instructor to shape the perceptions of the students as to the role of teachers and the nature of the teaching process.

The three components just discussed are not separate entities, but are interconnected. The seminar sessions normally end with the instructor assigning a specific aspect of teaching (e.g. grouping) as the focus observation during the following week. The observation assignment will be the focus of the journal entries and the next seminar discussion. Figure 4 illustrates how

Figure 3

Course Evaluation Form

Course Number _____
Student Number _____
School _____
Supervising Teacher _____
Grade-Seminar Written Assignments _____

Student Name _____
District _____
Grade Level/Subject _____
Semester _____
Grade-Classroom Evaluations _____
Course Grade _____
No. of University Classroom sessions _____

CLASSROOM EVALUATION

For the following competencies, rate the student according to the following scale: 1-Superior, outstanding; 2-Strong, above average; 3-Average; 4-Below average; 5-Inadequate; 6-Not observed

The student will have access to this information.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Enthusiasm						
B. Reasoning abilities						
C. Willingness, ability to assume responsibility						
D. Punctuality						
E. Completion of tasks						
F. Rapport-ability to relate to students						
G. Appearance						
H. Courtesy and tact						
I. Self-confidence						
J. Attendance						

Comments:

Standards established by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education require that this information be discussed with student.

Cooperating Teacher_____ Student Teacher_____

Date_____ Date_____

Signature indicates this has been discussed.

assignments in each component are interconnected. Figure 5 illustrates the goals that the assignments are expected to meet.

Benefits

As was stated earlier, the observation courses were designed to meet specific needs. First, they provide education majors with a chance to decide early in their college career if they want to be teachers. Second, they give the education major better preparation for student teaching. Third, university officials are aided in deciding which education majors need to be advised out of the education program.

Career Decisions. The courses have allowed education majors the opportunity to be involved in a classroom early in their university career, thus making it easier to confirm or reject their decision to teach. This has enabled them to select another major and invest their time and money in preparing for a career that they will use and enjoy.

In some observation classes, students responded to two questions at the end of the course. These questions were:

1. Do you still want to teach? Tell why.
2. How have the experiences in the Observation and Activities course helped you decide whether or not you want to teach?

Responses to these questions generally fit into one of four categories:

1. The courses confirmed what they already knew, they wanted to teach. ("Yes, I enjoy the children so much. It just confirmed my thought of wanting to teach.")
2. The courses helped them to make a definite decision to teach. ("I guess I should start by saying that I wasn't sure that I wanted to teach until I came to this class. I do know that I want to teach. I loved the kids in my class. I especially feel that within the last two or three weeks I have become closer to them. . . . Teaching is definitely wonderful.")

Figure 4

Interconnection of Assignments

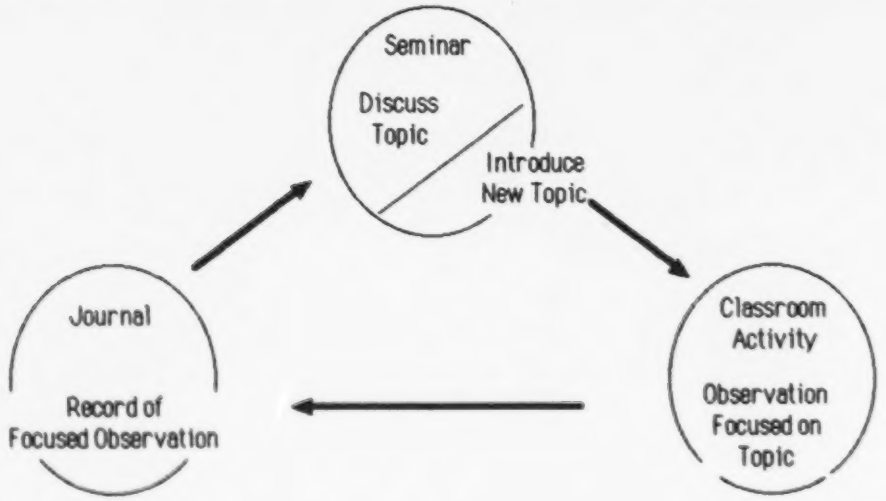
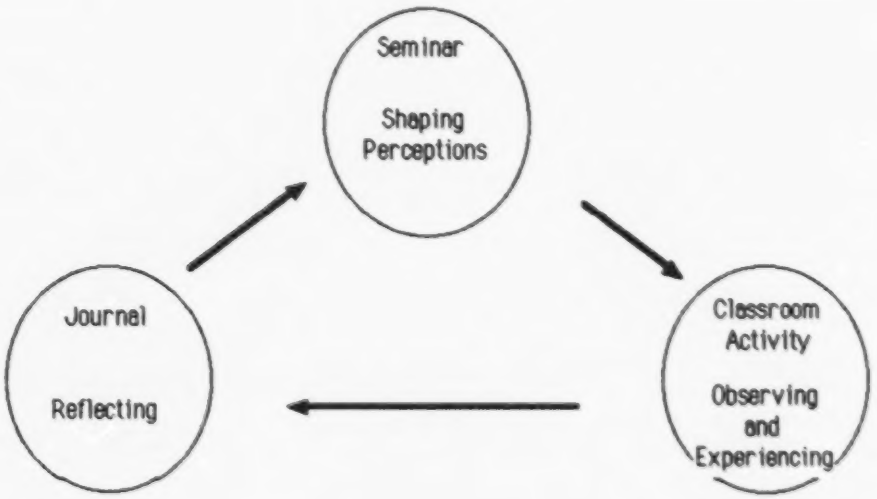


Figure 5

Assignment Goals



3. The courses caused them to reconsider their initial desire to teach. ("I'm not sure yet if I want to be a teacher. I'm still undecided but it has helped me a great deal in realizing that maybe I don't want to teach.")

4. The course caused them to make a definite decision not to be a teacher. ("For the main part we just had to work on bulletin boards and instructional materials and things like that. I just didn't like that because I wanted to be in with them and help them. Since I had already been used to that, that is what I was expecting and I didn't get to do a lot of that [working with children].")

The last student quoted changed her major after four weeks in the observation course. However, it has been the experience of the authors and other instructors that most education majors who completed the observation and activity courses found the experience confirmed that teaching was the proper goal for them. The statement, "I am even more committed to teaching now than I was.", was often used by the students after their eight week observation experience.

Teacher preparation. A second benefit of the courses is providing education majors with direct experiences with children before student teaching. Gates and New noted that prior to the observation courses student teachers tended to lack skills in discipline and organization as well as self-confidence. Both felt that the observation experience would help education majors to become more confident when teaching. Their assumptions have been confirmed by reports of student teacher supervisors.

Counseling Students. Being able to screen education majors early during their program of study has been another benefit of the observation and activities courses. This enabled the education faculty to advise students who did not seem to have the potential to perform satisfactorily as teachers out of the education program. Gates described certain students as individuals who, "... didn't fit the image we would like for teachers to possess.... that several of us felt like the student really didn't work well with kids." At the completion of the course

those students were counseled to consider another major. The education faculty was also alerted to scrutinize the continuing progress other students whose observation experience was less than satisfactory.

Future prospects

Currently, the content and procedures employed in Observation and Activity in the Elementary School are stable. Those faculty involved in elementary education have been pleased with the results of the course. However, one change is being made in order to more completely integrate the course into the whole educational program. Students will write a philosophy of education paper as a course assignment. The paper will be stored for several years and revised by the student as a part of a senior level course. The philosophy paper will become a part of the student's employment portfolio.

More changes are in store for Observation and Activity in the Secondary School. The course itself is being dropped an replaced with two one-hour practicum courses: Secondary Teaching Practicum I and Secondary Teaching Practicum II (see Figure 1). Like the original observation course, these courses will be offered as half semester block courses. Secondary education majors will be encourage to take Practicum I during their sophomore year, and Practicum II during their junior year. Only Practicum I will be required as a prerequisite for admittance to teacher education. The change is designed to give the secondary education major a teacher's point-of-view of the secondary classroom in Practicum I. Practicum II is designed to develop practical teaching skills.

Conclusion

Observation and Activity in the Elementary School and Observation and Activity in the Secondary School are courses that have proven their effectiveness to the education faculty at Northwest Missouri State University. Theses courses have also proven to popular with our

education majors. In the future, the observation courses and other early field experiences will continue to play and important, and possibly larger role in our teacher education program.

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